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Reagan Issues Plea for Support For the Contras

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WASHINGTON—In an all-out effort to rally support for his Contra aid program, President Reagan painted the Nicaraguan government as a direct and ominous threat to the U.S.

His 20-minute television address last night attacked the Nicaraguan government as "the malignancy in Managua," which the president warned would "spread and become a mortal threat to the entire New World" if unchecked. He warned that without his proposed \$100 million in aid for the anti-government Contra rebels over the next 18 months—\$70 million of it for military purposes—the danger to the U.S. "will grow worse, much worse."

The president's advisers hoped the television address would "raise the temperature" on an issue that so far has failed to capture popular support in advance of Thursday's scheduled House vote on the Contra aid proposal. The issue will go before the Senate next week.

The presidential pitch, which has grown in a nearly daily crescendo in the past two weeks, had two aims, according to one senior White House aide. The first was to "get the facts" about the character of the Sandinista government before the public, in the process "energizing the minority of people who really care." The second was to increase accountability of members of Congress on the issue by putting their votes under a bright spotlight.

"We want this to be a vote where you can't just duck," the aide said. Although the president made a bipartisan appeal, the political pressure at this point is especially directed at Republican members of Congress, whom one White House official described as having "absolutely no excuse—zilch—for not supporting the president on this."

In taking the issue public, the president has gone far out on a limb, using some of the harshest language of his presidency to

describe the Nicaraguan government, which he accused of narcotics trafficking and support of terrorism, as well as brutality. The issue as he framed it last night was, "Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya, right at the doorstep of the United States?"

To support his claims, the president used a photograph that he said showed a top Nicaraguan aide carrying a crate filled with narcotics bound for the U.S. Mr. Reagan also used maps with red shading for Communist-held or potentially threatened areas to show that Nicaragua could "threaten the Panama Canal, interdict our vital Caribbean sea lanes and ultimately move against Mexico."

Addressing the most potent U.S. fears about the issue, as identified by White House pollster Richard Wirthlin, the president suggested that if Nicaragua should overrun neighboring Central American countries, "desperate Latin people by the millions would begin fleeing north into the cities of the southern United States."

Despite such sharp rhetoric, recent polls suggest that the issue remains unclear for much of the U.S. public. In an ABC News poll taken this month, three-fifths of the 543 Americans surveyed wanted Congress to reject the aid request.

Closer Vote Predicted

Similarly, White House officials recently said they believed they were about 30 votes short of victory for the Contra aid package in the Democratic-controlled House. But by Friday, one senior White House official estimated that they were then only about a dozen votes short. And on NBC-TV's "Meet the Press" yesterday, White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan predicted, "We'll win."

In the Democratic response to the address last night, Sen. Jim Sasser of Tennessee didn't try to defend Nicaragua but instead took issue with President Reagan's methods, suggesting that peaceful negotiations be tried again before military steps are taken. He said the leaders of Nicaragua's four democratically elected neighbors share that view.

Support for the president's military program has been weak among Latin American leaders. Military aid was opposed by leaders of eight Latin American countries who met with Secretary of State George Shultz last month.

Private Support Claimed

Nonetheless, a senior administration official yesterday reiterated that the eight heads of Caribbean nations who met with the president in Grenada last month, as well as three of Nicaragua's neighbors, supported the military measures. However, the official declined to identify the three nations, saying their leaders had demanded secrecy for their own protection.

In an effort to allay fears that U.S. involvement might escalate into a Vietnam-style conflict, President Reagan said last night: "I am not talking about American troops. They are not needed; they have not been requested."

He didn't, however, mention that American military advisers have been and will remain involved in the training of Contra soldiers in Honduras. He also didn't mention that his military aid request, if granted, would in effect repeal all laws that bar the Defense Department, Central Intelligence Agency and other U.S. intelligence agencies from helping the Contras.

And to eliminate concern that the Contra funding might strain the U.S. budget, the president stressed that the \$100 million would be transferred from funds already appropriated to the Pentagon. But he didn't explain that he plans to ask Congress in the future to reimburse the Pentagon the \$100 million.